

BATH ABBEY

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There is no clear evidence as to when the first Christians reached Bath. We know they were here in the 3rd century when they are mentioned in a curse from the Sacred Spring of Sulis Minerva. That curse, employing a variation of what was obviously a legalistic formula, ('. . . whether slave or free, Christian or pagan . . .') implies that Christians were a recognised part of local society. They may not always have been a very respectable part of society, however. It may be that the local centurion Gaius Severius Emeritus was referring to them when he caused an altar to be erected in the Temple Precinct recording the rededication of this 'holy spot, wrecked by insolent hands'.

Although Christianity, having become the majority religion by the end of the Roman period, survived in the areas held by the Britons against the invading Saxons, it does not seem to have done so around Bath after the capture of the region in 577. The Severn was the limit of the territory nominally controlled by the British (or Welsh) bishops that Augustine so disastrously failed to win over to his mission in 598. After the missionary work of St. Augustine and his successors Christianity was again established, especially through the conversion of the Saxon kings (with the expectation that their loyal subjects would emulate them). It is against this background that we can begin our account of Bath's Abbey.

The Saxon Abbey

The earliest document that the Abbey can produce is a charter dated 675, granted by King Osric of the Hwicce, a sub-grouping

of the Kingdom of Mercia. This charter conveyed lands in or around Bath to a convent of holy virgins, presided over by an abbess, Berta. Such a display of piety is mildly surprising when we remember that the throne of Mercia had only recently been vacated by Penda, the fiercest pagan of them all. From her name it is clear that Berta was a Frankish woman. One of the most important witnesses to the charter, Bishop Leuthere of Wessex, was also a Frank, with family connections with several religious houses around Paris which were active in the spreading of the monastic ideal to newly converted areas. It has been plausibly suggested that the convent at Bath was founded on the Frankish model. This Frankish influence may be explained by the fact that both Leuthere's predecessors had been either Franks or trained in France, and that the Hwicce had not yet received a bishop of their own. By 681, when we next (and last) hear of the convent at Bath, the Abbess is, by name, now an Englishwoman, Bernguida (latinised Beornwyth), but her prioress(?), Folcburg, is still a foreigner.

Two other points are surprising, or at least remarkable. The first is that although the document was carefully kept through the middle ages as proof of the ancient and Royal foundation of the Abbey, it does not actually say that the convent was in Bath at all. The second point is that whereas the Abbey was, from at least the mid 8th century, a *male* establishment, the convent of the first two charters is clearly a female foundation.

To take the second point first. It has been said that the Bath convent might have been a 'double house' of men and women, presided over, as was often the case, by an abbess, and that this mutated into a single sex establishment. On the other hand, Archbishop Theodore, who also signed the document, is known to have been against such establishments. The next mention of a religious house at Bath is in 757, and refers to the Brethren of the monastery of St Peter in Bath, and here we are clearly dealing with the male establishment that lasted until the Dissolution in 1539.

Returning to the first point, does the 675 and 681 evidence relate at all to Bath Abbey? It would be simple to think not; but it seems certain that the monks in the 12th century believed it did, and we do not have the materials to argue the case further. Clearly, if it does not, then we have another religious house to be

located, which was given lands in the area, but could have been itself located anywhere within King Osric's gift; and we would have to accept that the documentation of the Abbey of St Peter only goes back to 757.

Recent work has suggested that the 100 hides of land granted by Osric to the abbey in 675 can be identified with the land of the "Bath Forum" (derived from 'foreign' or 'forinsecum' – a kind of Saxon estate) outlined in 1357. This would make an estate with the known characteristics of a Royal estate in Saxon times, centred on Bath, or the immediate area, and taking in a consolidated stretch of land from Weston and Kelston on the west; Batheaston on the east; as far as Limpley Stoke on the south; and St Catherine's and Langridge on the north. An ample estate and perhaps a further indication of the identity of the 7th century convent with the later monastery.

It is also true that the charter is, technically, a 12th century forgery. The latter point need not detain us, however. The document that exists, although prepared to make a point, seems to have used good historical information from a lost original, at least as far as the provisions and witness list is concerned. In this it is not alone among the contents of clerical muniment rooms.

Little is heard of Bath Abbey, apart from the odd reference, until the ascendancy of the Kings of Wessex in the 10th century, when many grants of land were made to it, starting with a grant by Athelstan in 931 and continuing at intervals until Edgar in 970. During this period, also, the Abbey and town moved from the administration of Mercia into that of Wessex.

The abbey seems to have taken part in the great monastic reform of the period, which it was able to do, in part at least, because it had survived the Danish wars and Viking attacks, which so many other monasteries had not. Its involvement in this renewal both of the moral and the political status of the Church is probably why it was chosen as the site of the long delayed coronation of Edgar the Peaceable in 973, as he was closely involved in these reforms. The fact that, as a result of the royal benefactions earlier in the century, the monastery had been able to build a grand new church, probably of stone and described as *mira fabrica* – 'marvellously wrought' – in 957, only made it all the more suitable for this important political and religious event.

The Town

By the time of Edgar's coronation there was a bustling community around the Abbey, safe behind the walls of a militarily organised burh based by King Alfred on the ruins of the Roman town. But what had the first founders of the house found, when they arrived in the town, whether in 675 or 757?

The archaeological evidence fades away rapidly after the formal end of the Roman occupation in 410. There is no reliable way of dating the continuing occupation after 420–430, when pottery and coin manufacture and use cease; but it is clear that the general standard of life, especially civic life, was in decline. In Bath itself, the central complex of Baths and Temple was being allowed to flood and silt up from the mid 4th century, and the great buildings became gradually neglected. Nowhere in the middle of town is there evidence of continued activity beyond about 450. On the other hand the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in recording the victory over the Britons at the Battle of Dyrham in 577, implies that there was a "King" of Bath, which in turn suggests some sort of occupation based on the town. The likelihood is that the defensible walls of the Roman town were attractive to whatever power, in the absence of Roman control, took over the administration of the area. We know that in the period of over 150 years while this part of Britain was holding back the Saxons, the ruling parties fought more wars among themselves than against the invaders. Therefore a defensive stronghold was essential.

Such a stronghold would be bound to pass into the control of the Saxon kings, and this would then explain Osric's possession and his ability to pass it on to the convent. Royal possession of abandoned Roman towns and forts was a comparative commonplace and they were often given over to the church, entire or in part, for the foundation of a monastery. Examples are known or suspected at Winchester, Portchester, Burgh Castle, and London. The enclosure demanded by monastic practice was already there, and building material and perhaps useful buildings were present too. It seems likely that the Baths were essentially standing, up to their knees in marsh, and that the Temple substructures may have been visible. The central part of the town was probably deserted by this time.

The Monastery

We would like to know where the new community was, what physical form it took, and how it was organised. For the latter point we may surmise that the convent conformed to the norms of its day, with an abbess (certainly of noble and perhaps royal blood) and a group of nuns, enclosed and performing worship under the control of the local bishop. The monastery in 757 was run by "brothers", by 781 more precisely described as canons, subordinate to the diocese of Worcester (under the control of Offa, who had wholly absorbed Osric's kingdom). What its achievements and qualities were is unknown, but it was described as a "most famous monastery" (*monasterium celeberrimum*) at this time. In the 10th century, as a result of the monastic reforms of SS. Dunstan and Oswald, the community was re-established as a Benedictine monastery, which it remained until the Dissolution. Traditionally, St Alphege was the first abbot, but references to Abbot Aescwige in 965 and 970 suggest that the honour belongs to him.

The Site of the Abbey Church

As to the position of the Saxon abbey, we can only guess that it occupied a site somewhere within the later medieval precinct (fig. 1). Comparison with sites elsewhere, such as Wells or Winchester, might suggest a location somewhere near, but not necessarily under the present building. Alternatively, it is still possible that it may have stood on the site of the modern abbey, as is the case at Romsey, for example. Another intriguing possibility is that the abbey church may be represented by the undoubtedly Saxon church of St James that stood west of Abbey Green until 1279. In that year it was partly demolished and converted into the bishop's private chapel, and the parishioners provided with a church on a new site (the remains of which are buried underneath Woolworth's) that served until the Blitz of 1942. But, of course, the dedication is against this suggestion.

Only excavation now holds any hope for discovering the site of the Saxon abbey. A few scraps of evidence in the form of burials suggest that Saxon cemeteries existed immediately south of the

present abbey church, west of it, and west of Abbey Green. Perhaps the most significant, but most puzzling of these scraps, is an inscribed lead plaque which was found in the cemetery south of the abbey. This apparently records the burial of a sister of the community, Eadgyvu. At first glance this would seem to confirm the position of the 7th century convent on the site of the later establishments. However, the year is missing from the date formulary which tells us that Eadgyvu died on the 17th September, and the lettering is certainly not as early as the 7th century. It is possible that the body was reinterred during some late Saxon building operations. Nonetheless, if the original reading is accepted (and it is now largely illegible) it is strong *prima facie* evidence for the equation of the 675 foundation with the later medieval monastery.

The Abbey Church

The earliest church was almost certainly of wood. But with such an abundant supply of Roman brick, tile and ready cut stone literally underfoot, it may be that these were employed as well. It was discovered, during the recent excavations in the Temple Precinct, that the walls of the Sacred Spring (the King's Bath) were quarried for their smaller, easily handled stones in about the 6th to 8th centuries, and the large ones were left lying around. This could well have been done by monastic builders. In appearance, the building would probably have seemed insignificant and plain to our eyes. A small, and rather crude, double-light stone window embrasure, unglazed, may derive from the Saxon abbey, but hardly suggests *mira fabrica*. Ancillary buildings to the church there obviously were, but these have left no trace.

The period from the 10th century greatness until the Domesday survey is almost blank, with merely a few names of abbots appearing in the void. An important episode is mentioned by Leland, however, writing in the 16th century, who claims the monks were expelled for a time, by a Mercian Earl. The abbey must have been involved in the great events of 1013, when the western thanes gathered here to swear fealty to Sweyn of Denmark, after the defeat of Aethelred Unraed (the Unready); but no record remains.

At the time of the Domesday Survey, in 1087, the abbey, though no longer at the centre of national affairs, was still affluent. Apart from lands in Somerset and Gloucester, it held, in the town and around, twenty-four burgesses paying twenty shillings a year; a mill, similarly productive; and twelve acres of meadow. The mill was almost certainly the Monks' Mill in what is now Parade Gardens, and the meadows are likely to have been those we know the abbey held in 1279 between the town walls and the river Avon (later known as the Hams). Prosperity was growing too: the annual revenues of the abbey had increased from £47 3s 6d to £71 13s 6d between the reign of King Edward and that of King William. The abbey was not long left in independent enjoyment of this prosperity. In 1088 the town, and perhaps the abbey, was sacked by supporters of the claim of Robert Curthose, Duke of Normandy, to the crown of William Rufus. The rebellion was unsuccessful, but one result was to place the abbey in the hands of the King.

The Cathedral Priory

During the later Saxon period, the abbey notionally came under the spiritual oversight of the Bishop of Wells. In 1088 the Saxon incumbent, Giso, died and was replaced by the King's French physician, John of Tours. According to the register of Wells, the King presented the abbey at Bath to the new bishop in the same year, although the charter is dated 1091. At the same time William granted the town of Bath itself to the bishop, with the expressed purpose 'that with the greater honour, he may fix his pontifical seat there'.

When the intention to move the seat of the bishop to Bath from Wells was conceived is uncertain, but it was fully in accord with the papal and royal policy of removing cathedra from small rural sites to proper cities. We may conjecture that the plan was agreed between the King and John of Tours when the latter was elevated to the see. Money seems to have been passed to the King, and John certainly took the care to bribe William's successor, Henry, for the confirmation of his rights.

Be that as it may, the move from Wells and the subordination of the abbey created enemies for the new bishop in both places. John

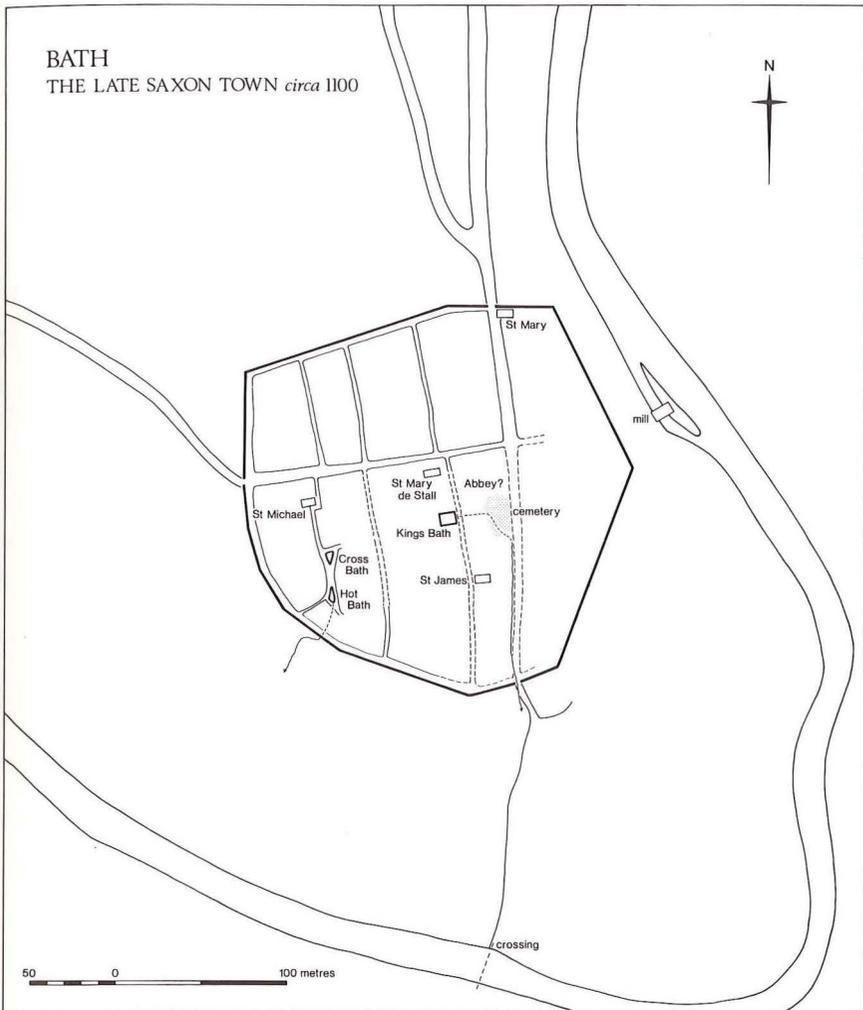
made his peace with the monks at Bath in 1106, but Wells never gave up the fight for the restoration of its former prestige. The bishop, coming to Bath, became the titular abbot; and the abbey, actually run by a prior, became instead a cathedral priory. But organisational changes were not the only alterations with which the monks had to contend.

The New Precinct

John 'pullid down the old Chirch of St. Peter at Bath, and erectid a new, much fairer', (Leland) 'with a great and elaborate circuit of walls' (William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificorum*, lib.ii). This new church was certainly under way by 1106, and was probably begun in the 1090s. It was a huge project, only partly finished at John's death in 1123. But it was only part of a complete reorganisation of the Abbey precinct; indeed, the size of the redevelopment has never been surpassed in central Bath. Almost the entire south east quarter of the Saxon city was taken up with the cathedral close (fig. 1 and 2). Topographical evidence suggests that the High Street was truncated to its present length, i.e. reduced to half, and at least one other street closed to extend the old abbey close. A new street, Stall Street, was laid out to restore the north-south route across the city. The rentable space along each side provided income for the bishop.

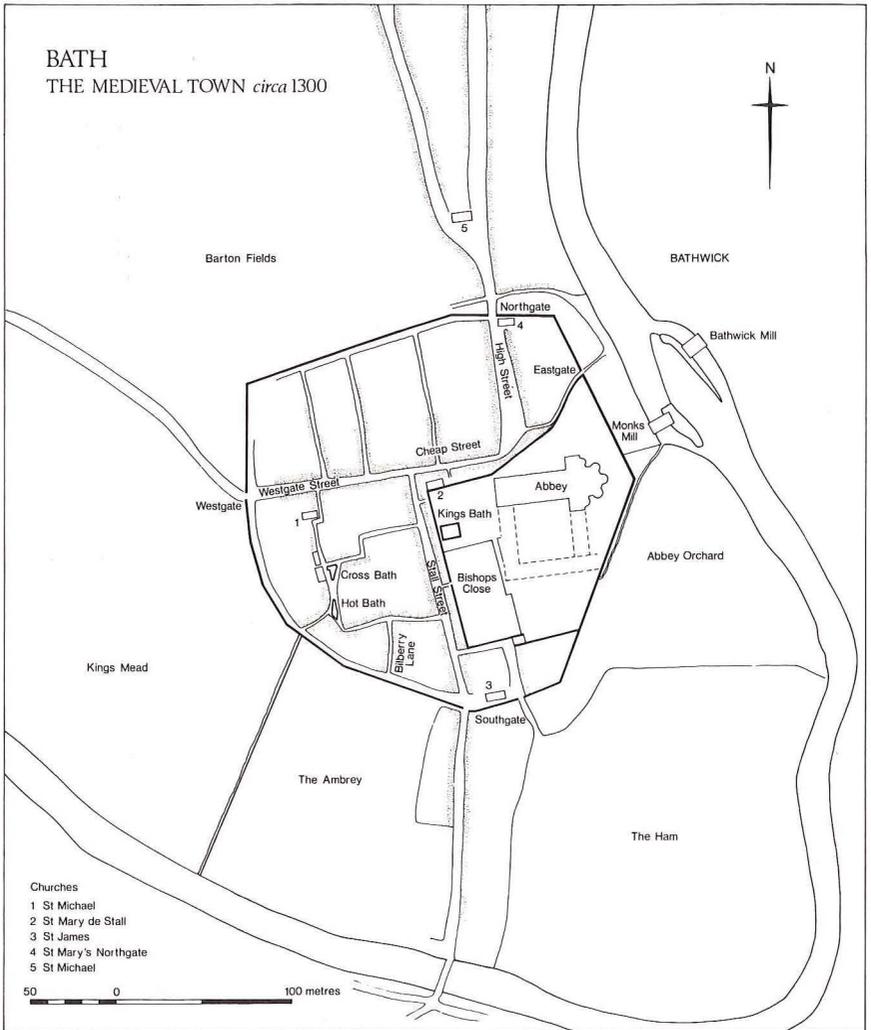
The old parish church of St James continued in use but was engulfed by the bishop's new palace east of Stall Street and south-west of the new church. Precisely how much more of the city was taken for the precinct cannot be calculated, as the extent of the Saxon abbey is unknown. It does, however, seem clear that a substantial extra portion was taken.

Cartographic, documentary and archaeological evidence enable us to trace the outline of this close. The eastern boundary was the city wall. On the north, the cathedral close was bounded by a wall running from the Eastgate (or Lodgate) along Boatstall Lane and the south side of the houses on Cheap Street to the corner of Stall Street, where stood the church of St Mary de Stalls. From here it turned south behind the houses along its east side to Abbeygate Street. At the east end of this street was, naturally enough, the abbey gate. South of the gate, the wall continued eastwards until



1 The Late Saxon town and possible position of the Abbey (from *The City of Bath*, B. Cunliffe).

it rejoined the city wall a little above its south east corner. A short length of this last part of the close wall survives, much repaired and rebuilt, on the north side of the east end of Abbeygate Street.



2 The Medieval town (From *The City of Bath*, B. Cunliffe).

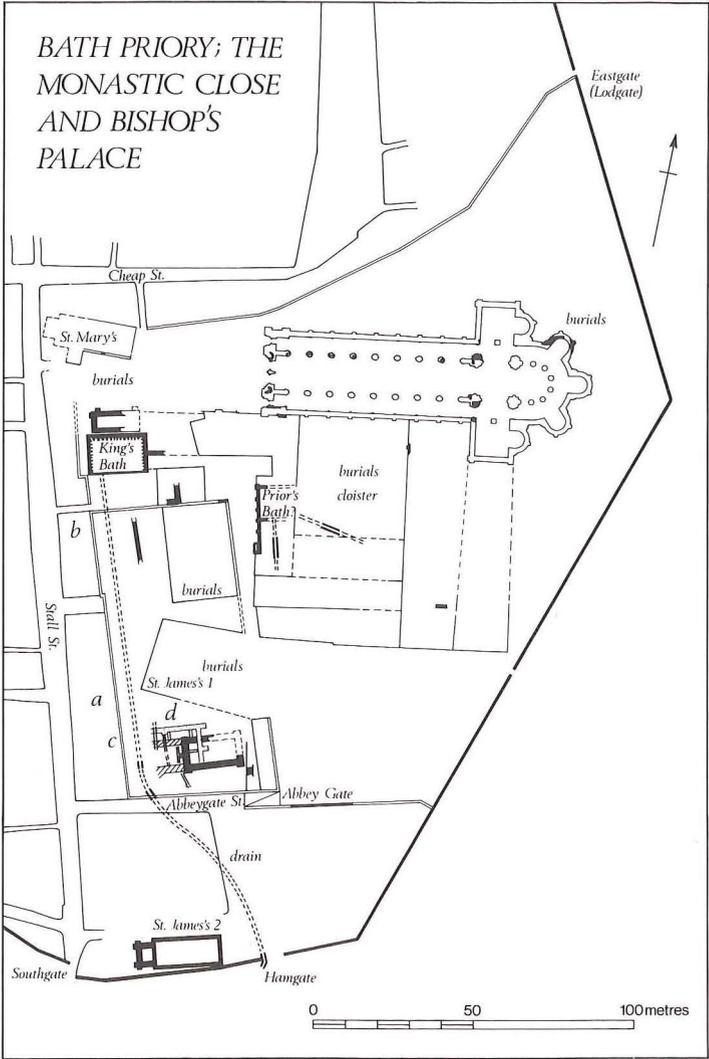
The Baths

Also included with the close was the main thermal spring, now known as the King's Bath; and it is generally agreed that it was John, with his medical interests, who had the Roman ruins around the spring cleared and who built a new bath around it. Certainly, the Baths were described in the 1140s as supplied with naturally heated water and being equipped with splendid arches. There is no notice of the Saxons being interested in the Baths, beyond clearly being aware of their existence. Even the famous poem, *The Ruin*, shows no sign of understanding the use of the hot springs for bathing. The monkish name for Bath, Akeman-neceaster implies awareness of the water's healing powers. Bede describes Bath as being frequented by visitors to bathe, but he is possibly using traditions derived from Roman sources, rather than describing truly contemporary happenings.

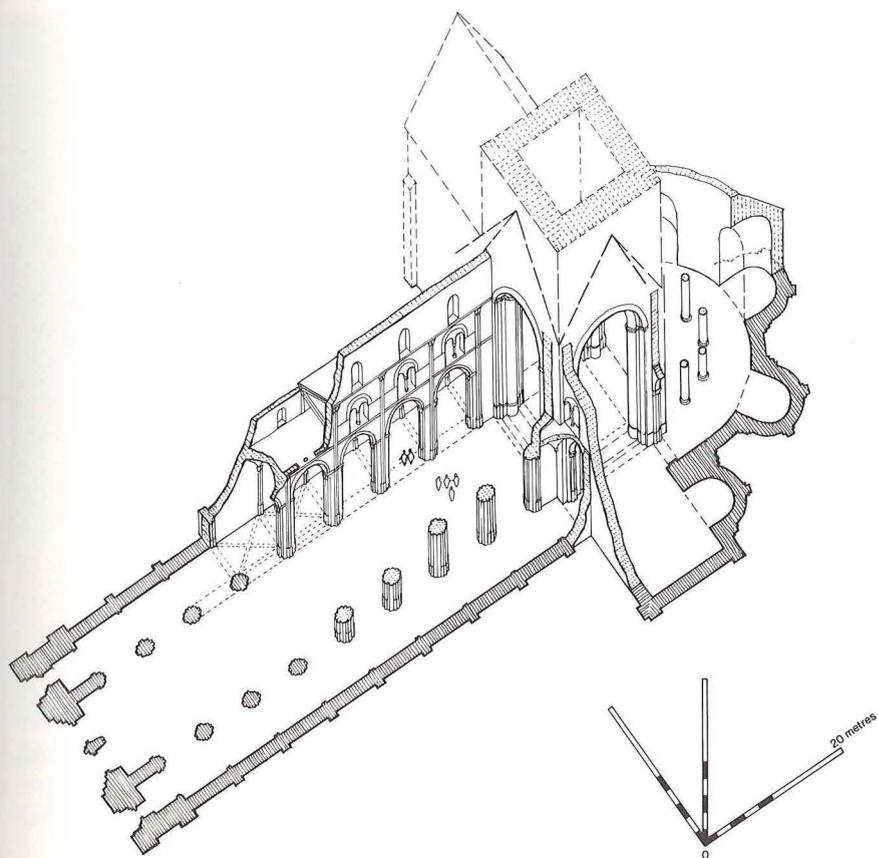
Leland claims there was another bath, the Prior's Bath, 'in which ther be no springes, els void'; i.e. it was fed from elsewhere. It is likely that this bath was in the prior's lodging, due south of the west end of the new church, for here it was possible to tap the lukewarm water still percolating through the silted Roman Great Bath and drainage system. The private Kingston Baths built on the site in the 18th century were supplied in this way.

The Cathedral

The new church was, in keeping with Norman self-confidence, planned on a monumental scale. The present Abbey occupies merely the nave of John of Tours' church, the buried ruins of which now extend far out under Orange Grove. The plan was cruciform with a long, aisled nave, possibly with twin towers at the west end. The crossing was capped with a tower. Excavations in Orange Grove in 1979 showed that the east end was apsidal and provided with an ambulatory from which radiated three smaller apsidal chapels. This layout is represented by the only known illustration of the Norman building, on the Abbey Seal (fig. 4 and 5). Bishop John would have been familiar with this type of plan in his native Maine and Touraine, and may have



3 The Cathedral Close and Bishops Palace. The solid black, hatched and stippled areas are archaeologically proven walls. Unbroken lines are walls and boundaries derived from post medieval information. Broken lines represent hypothetical walls. The City wall is shown in black and the Cathedral Close in double outline. a: The property mentioned in 1274–1290 as adjacent to the Bishop's Court. b: Property mentioned in 1309 as 'against the wall of the Bishop'. c: Property against the 'old Pallace' in 1573. d. 'Old Palace Yard'.



4 Reconstruction of Norman Cathedral, drawing by Sheila Gibson.

actively encouraged it. The easternmost of the chapels was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and was the only part of the Norman building to be greatly altered. It was rebuilt on a larger scale by Bishop Bytton in the 1260s.

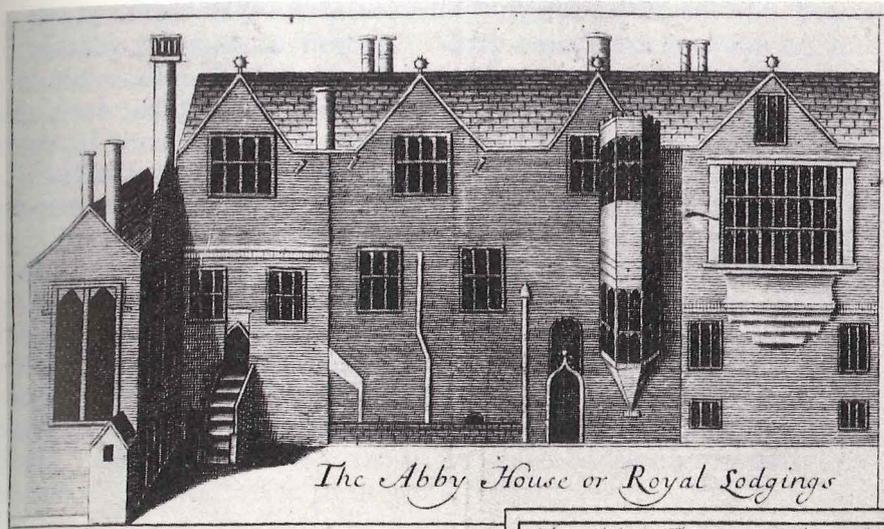
The crossing area was slightly elevated from the nave, and the transept floors were raised higher still, with arched screens separating them from the crossing. We can probably imagine complex liturgical movements taking advantage of this sophisticated layout. At least the lower part of the building, that is the



5 The Seal of the Abbey, showing the apsidal chapels at the east end of the Cathedral (From *The City of Bath*, B. Cunliffe).

aisles, were vaulted as we are told that the 'lower vaults' were complete at John of Tours' death. It is more than likely that the choir was vaulted as well, but only following fires in 1119 and 1137 (the latter particularly devastating). The nave, and perhaps the transepts, would have been given splendid timber roofs. The whole church was over 350 feet long, the match and more of any of its contemporaries, such as Norwich, Winchester, Tewkesbury or Gloucester (fig. 4).

Parts of the Norman building can still be seen under the floor and incorporated in the standing structure of the present one. The remains of an arch of the Norman transept screen can be observed outside the north-east corner of the chancel, and almost



6 Abbey House (the west range of claustral buildings) from Gilmore's map of 1694.

two storeys of Norman arcade at the east end of the south aisle. Architectural mouldings from the church are visible in the vestry. Much more could be brought to light if it becomes possible to excavate at the east end of the present building under Orange Grove.

The Claustral Buildings

Very little of these necessary buildings survives or is known from documentary sources. Bishop Robert is credited with building the refectory, infirmary, chapter house, cloister and dormitory. Such buildings and others must have existed in some form before his efforts, either as survivors from the Saxon abbey or as temporary constructions of John of Tours' time. The few fragments that have been recognised in archaeological excavations probably refer to Robert's activities. These include a part of the infirmary, suitably sited just north of the King's Bath, uncovered during the excavations under the Pump Room in 1982; and a length of walling,

recorded in the 1870s, which is part of the western cloister range, and possibly of the Prior's Bath. This range, hugely modified, survived until 1755 as Abbey House (fig. 6); but it is impossible to tell how much of the fabric was actually medieval by that date. A portion of the east range of the cloister was uncovered in the 1860s, and a tiny fragment of 12th century wall, that could be a part of the refectory on the south cloister range, has also been revealed under Sally Lunn's House, in North Parade Passage.

For information on the layout of the close, we are reliant on analogy and known practice, and also on the fact that the property boundaries here before 1806 grew out of, and reflect, the late medieval plan. Given this, it is possible to create the plan shown on fig. 3, based on 17th and 18th century maps. It can be seen how several of the excavated medieval walls do fall on the later property divisions.

The Bishop's Palace

Noticeable on the property plans of the 18th century is a large self-contained rectangle, in the south-west corner of the cathedral close. This plot, set in the most secluded part of the close and opening on the north on to the King's Bath, has recently been recognised as the boundary of the bishop's close, containing the palace.

The clearest reference to the palace is Leland's in 1542, where we are told 'this John erectid a palace at Bath in the south-west corner of the monasterie of St Peter's at Bath one great square tour of it yet appere'. Other 16th and early 17th century references make it clear the the 'Old Pallace' was to be found south of the King's Bath and west of Abbey Green. In particular, the western wall of the close is identified as coterminous with that of the palace, and Old Palace Yard (now vanished) is identified as being in this area. Measurements given in documents in the early 13th century, outlining part of the bishop's palace (apparently his private quarters, the 'Bishop's Bower'), fit well with a plot on the southern side of the yard. Excavations here in 1984 and 1985 uncovered substantial masonry buildings whose inhabitants had enjoyed a noticeably high standard of living from the late 11th century until the early 14th. The buildings can be safely ascribed

to the bishop and his retainers. The condition of the buildings then suffered a steep decline. This picture matches the documentary evidence of the declining fortunes of the priory, especially after the bishops ceased to reside in Bath altogether after about 1290.

Work was still being carried out on the episcopal palace in 1279, when a private chapel for the bishop was created out of the nave of St James' church. This was thought convenient, as it adjoined the bishop's chamber (the chancel being demolished and, as the bishop's charter permitting all this records, marked with a cross to avoid desecration). As noted above, the parishioners, who must have been a great nuisance to the bishop for nearly 200 years, were removed south to a new plot granted them for the purpose. The bishops, however, must rarely have used the new chapel, and by 1328 were ready to pass over the whole of the private residence to the prior and brethren.

St James's Church

Medieval documents from the late 13th and early 14th centuries make it clear that the bishop's palace extended from Abbeygate Street on the south to the passage separating it from the King's Bath on the north, and from the rear of the tenements on Stall Street on the west. These conclusions are reinforced by the early post-medieval evidence. The eastern limits are not clear, except at the southern end, where the Porter's Lodging was situated, but must obviously fall close to those shown on fig. 3, based on post-medieval property lines. Within this neat near-rectangle there was an obvious anomaly, only partially straightened by what appears to be a rearrangement dating from the early 17th century, and still visible today. Number 2, Abbey Street and the present Crystal Palace public house occupy a plot that is noticeably at an angle to the rest of the layout here, indeed to that of the whole monastery. The only buildings that share this alignment are the now vanished church of St Mary de Stalls, and – to a lesser extent – the cathedral itself. Very limited excavations under both present buildings have revealed the existence of a Christian burial ground, many of whose occupants displayed physical traits common among the Anglo-Saxons.

The propinquity of the bishop's chamber, the orientation, and the presence of early burials points powerfully to this plot being exactly that of St James's before 1279. That it was of Saxon origin is clear by its awkward incorporation into the bishop's close. It was obviously already too well established by 1091 to move, and had to be accommodated in the new plans.

The Cloister

The cloister remained as a garden until the mid 18th century, and the buildings around it perpetuated the monastic plan, except on the east side, where the Chapter House and Parlour were sited, and which was left open after their demolition. Thus the map of 1725 shows, in outline, the medieval plan. It is likely that the eastern range extended southwards, not on a line with the transept, but from a line further west, hinted at by the fragment of walling found in the 1860s, and the property boundary it lies on (fig. 3). Nonetheless, the cloister may well have run from the transept. This would place the cloister among the biggest in England. This is perhaps not surprising, as John of Tours' church was itself one of the largest of its day.

The Rest of the Close

Little is known of the layout of the other parts of the priory. There was a burial ground to the north of the east end of the cathedral, but nothing is known of the rest of the area north of the church. There was possibly a gate through the north wall of the close, leading to the lane to the city's Eastgate, for access to the monks' mill, on the river just outside the gate. There was another leading through the city wall to the meadows and orchards on the east. The main gate appears to have been on the south, at Abbeygate Street, just before it turns into Abbey Green.

Decline

The monks at Wells had never forgotten the slight they felt they had received when the cathedral was moved to Bath. As early as

the reign of Robert of Lewes (1136–1166) the squabbles between Bath and Wells led to Bishop Robert declaring that the bishopric should be known as Bath and Wells, and that the brethren of both establishments should elect the new incumbent. It was during the episcopate of the first bishop so elected, Reginald FitzJocelyn, that the present great church at Wells was started, as if to underline its new status. The next bishop, Savaric, undid all Wells' efforts by ignoring their rights in his election and changing the title yet again to 'Bath and Glastonbury' when he acquired that wealthy abbey by a typical piece of monastic machination involving the Holy Roman Emperor, Richard the Lionheart, and the elevation of the reluctant Abbot of Glastonbury to a bishopric. This produced an ecclesiastical lawyer's delight, which resulted in appeals all the way to the Pope. Finally it was decreed in 1244, after a whole series of attempts first by one side and then the other to usurp the other's jealously guarded privileges, that the bishop's title should be as declared by Bishop Robert 'of Bath and Wells'. Bishop Roger, whose irregular election in 1242 had been the occasion for the final appeal to the Pope, died in 1247, and was the last bishop to be buried in the cathedral at Bath. Thereafter, not only the dead but also the living bishop was reserved to Wells. It became increasingly the case that the bishop resided at Wells, and only rarely visited Bath. When he did come, he tended to stay in his manors at Bathampton and Claverton, rather than in town. As we have seen, by the early 14th century the bishop's palace was in poor condition and was passed over to the prior.

Nonetheless, an eye was kept on the establishment, and Bishop John of Drokensford arranged a collection in 1324 for the repair of the church. The work, which included the laying of a tile floor in the crossing, was completed in the following year. This tile floor was discovered in the 1860s by James Irvine, during the restoration works of that decade. In the absence of the bishop the priors of Bath left in charge hardly provided a Christian example to their community. Robert de Cloppecote (1302–1331) was avaricious and unscrupulous, often reprimanded by the bishop, and fined by the King for his injustices. John de Iford (fl.1346–7) was accused of adultery and forced to resign. Thus throughout the 14th and 15th centuries the establishment at Bath was left to fester quietly, its decline perhaps matching that of the town, whose

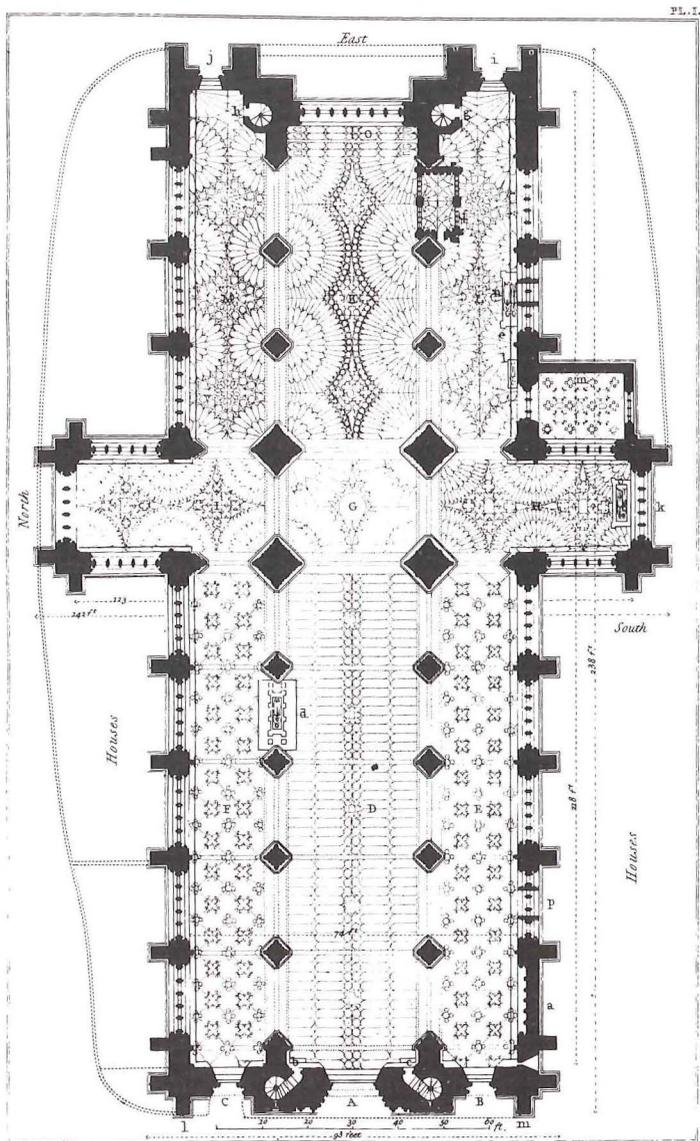
prosperity had also been weakening. But this was changed by the succession to the see of Oliver King who was made bishop in 1496.

Re-building

When King arrived in Bath he found the affairs of the monastery lax, and in a letter to the prior, written in 1500, he describes the church as 'ruined to the foundations'. Sir John Harington records that King was moved, by a dream, to rebuild the church, and to improve the quality of observance of the monks. In his dream he saw angels ascending and descending a ladder, and heard a voice saying, 'let an Olive establish the crown and let a King restore the church'. The obvious pun on his name referred to his past political achievements, to which he felt he must now add more spiritual ones.

The work went ahead, and the dream was represented by the strange sculptural composition on the present west front. The monks were made to give up a part of their allowances to pay for the building, which King pushed forward as quickly as possible. He died, however, in 1503, when the work was only well-begun. It was carried on enthusiastically by the prior, William Bird, who seems to have brought at least the masonry of the building to completion by his death in 1525. His successor, Hollewey, under indifferent bishops, including two cardinals whose interests were elsewhere, also strove to complete the work, but in vain. In 1535 King Henry VIII's commissioners were on the prowl, assessing the wealth of the abbeys, in the investigations that led to the Dissolution. In 1539 the prior surrendered the abbey to the King. The church had apparently been roofed, as £4800 worth of lead alone was stripped for sale shortly afterwards.

The building that Bishop King started, although smaller than the old Norman church, was in the forefront of national architectural design. The foremost masons of the day, the Vertues, were engaged, and a lofty, up-to-the-minute building full of light and space replaced the ruinous cathedral of John of Tours. It was cruciform in plan, but simpler in this than its predecessor, and also much smaller, occupying only the nave of the Norman church (fig. 7). Effects were sought more in the soaring spaces,



THE ABBEY CHURCH,

BATH

Ground Plan, with firms of the graining &c.

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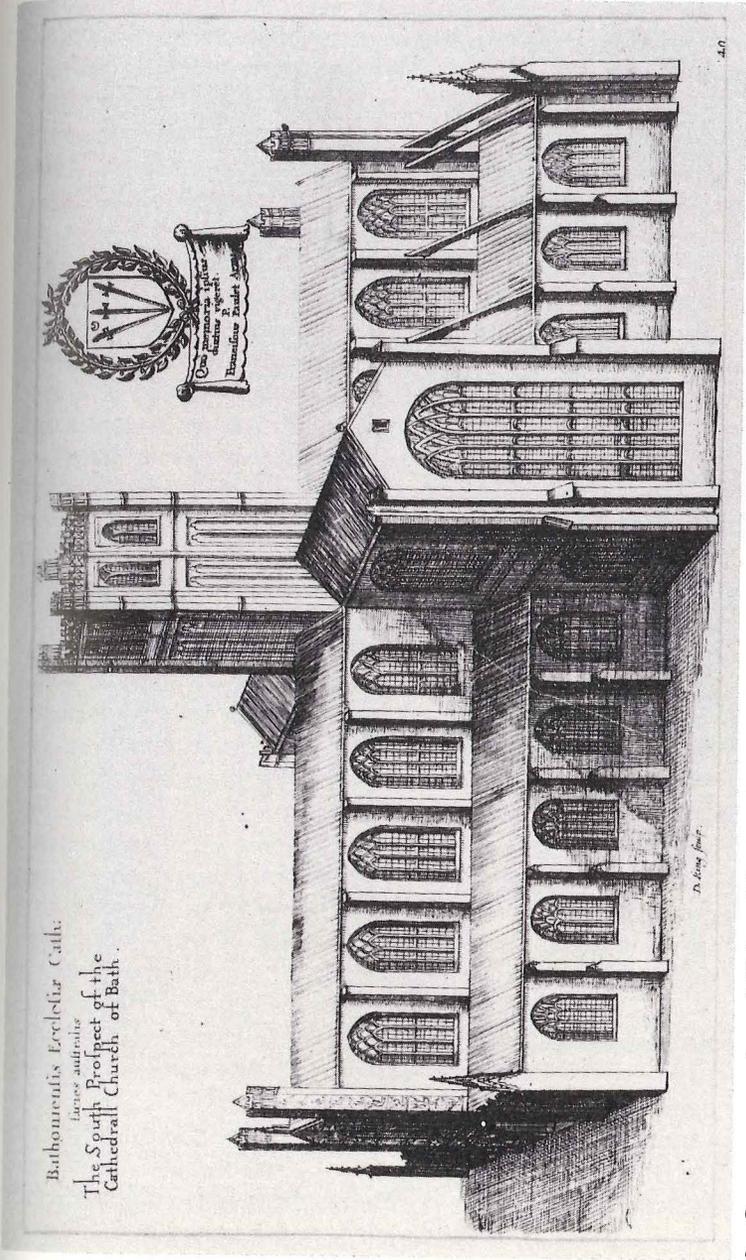
7 Plan of the Bishop King's Abbey in 1825 (From *History and Antiquities of Bath Abbey Church*, J. Britton).

and in the fine masonry and architectural detailing, than in sheer size, as epitomised in Prior Bird's chantry chapel at the east end of the church. The east end was fan vaulted, probably after King's death. The nave presumably had a timber roof, but this was demolished after the Dissolution. The south transept either was not completed or was partially demolished after the Dissolution. The church was still nominally a cathedral, but an act of Henry VIII in 1542 made Wells the sole head of the diocese, and the canons there solely responsible (under the King's supremacy) for electing the bishop.

Parish Church

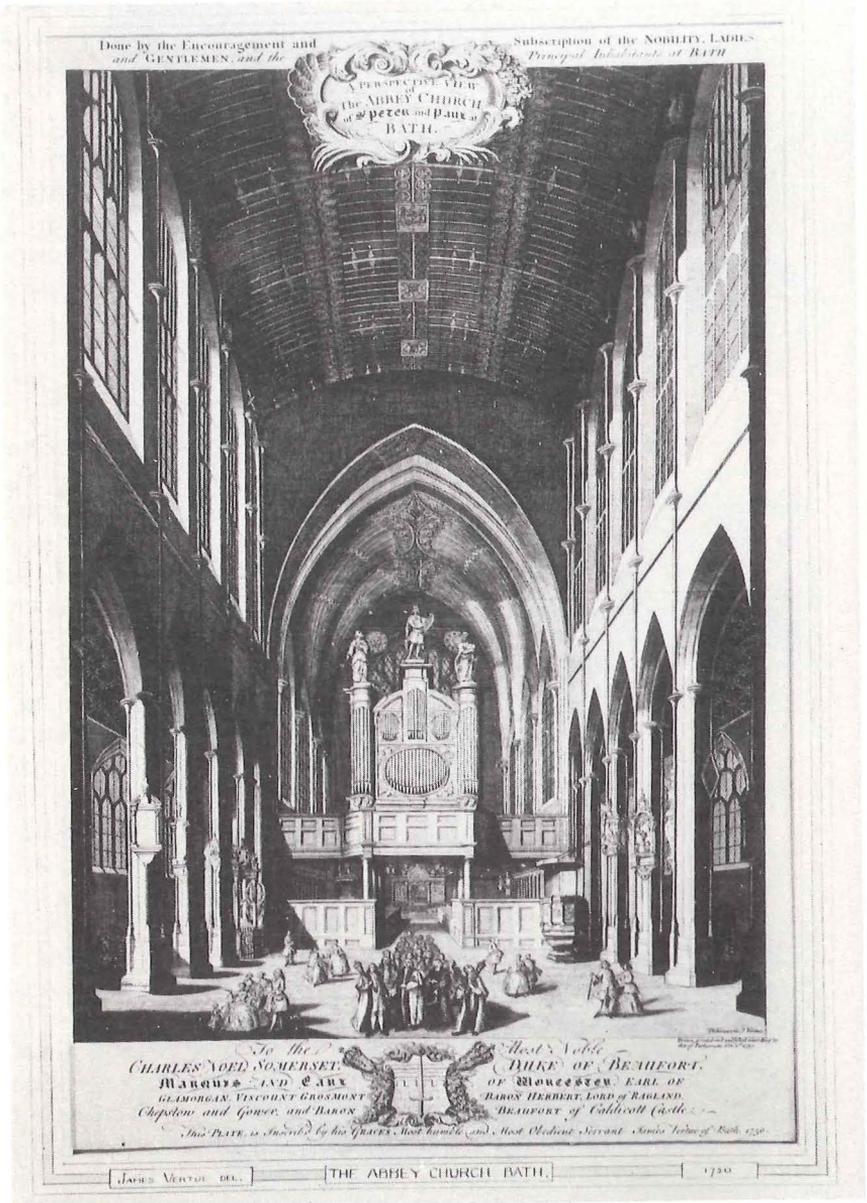
The Commissioners attempted to sell the whole abbey and its lands to the city for £500. The city fathers, with commendable political astuteness, refused this bargain offer, as Sir John Harrington tells us, for fear of later being accused of defrauding the King. The property was sold off, the saleable building materials going for scrap. The lands went to Humphrey Colles, who shortly sold out to Matthew Colthurst. His son Edmund seemed to entertain the notion of living in the Abbey House using the rest of the grounds in the city as a garden. He presented the roofless and unwindowed shell of the church to the corporation, who were thereby landed with the building after all. Colthurst moved out in 1569, but seems to have hung on to some of his Bath property until 1611.

The city, despite its ownership, did little to restore the church. There was probably a view that there was no need for this vast edifice. After all, the city had more than enough parish churches, and the Abbey has always been too big for Bath's parochial requirements. The impetus for the rebirth of King's church came from private citizens. The first to move was Peter Chapman, who restored part of the north aisle in 1572. After a visit by Queen Elizabeth a general collection was raised throughout the country, and the windows and roofing in the east end were repaired. Another notable benefactor was Thomas Bellot. Work slowed, however, and the choir was not fitted up for divine service until the 1590s, some years after the formation of the new parish of SS. Peter and Paul in 1583.



Bathoniensis Ecclesiar Cath:
hanc aedificavit
The South Prospect of the
Cathedral Church of Bath.

8 Copper engraving of Bishop King's Abbey, after Richard Newcourt, 1655.
Note lack of flying buttresses on nave.



9 View of interior of Abbey, 1750, William and George Vertue.

The fabric was still far from complete. One of the most active enthusiasts for finishing the work was Sir John Harington, local squire, courtier and godson of the Queen. He wrote, agitated and cajoled all the relevant authorities, and is suspected of resorting to graffiti in charcoal on the Abbey ruins, in his attempt to get things done.

'O, Church! I waile thy wofull plight
Whom King nor Cardinall nor Clerke nor Knight
Have yet restored to auncient right'

(The names are those of King's successors in the see.)

He finally found a ready ear in Bishop Montague, who came to Wells in 1608. His masterstroke was to have invited the bishop to shelter from the rain in the church. The prelate remarked that he was still getting wet. 'How can that be, seeing that we are within the church?' Harington asked. To which the bishop replied, 'True, but your church is unroofed, Sir John.' Closing the moral trap, Harington then rejoined, 'The more is the pity, and the more doth it call for the munificence of your Lordship' (Britton 1825). Whether the story is true or not, Montague did press on with the restoration, and the building was to all intents completed by 1611. The work was not cheaply done. The transepts were given stone fan vaults, similar but not identical to the choir, and the nave fitted up with a stone-ribbed plaster and timber barrel vault (figs. 8 and 9). Montague, although Bishop of Wells, seems to have had a real affection for Bath, since he arranged to be buried in the Abbey, rather than his cathedral at Winchester, whither he had been translated in 1616.

Epilogue

The church thus completed suffered little substantial change through the next two centuries. A myriad of memorials, mostly of 18th century date, led Dr. Harington in the early 19th century, to recall how 'these walls, adorned with monument and bust, shew how Bath waters serve to lay the dust', and obscured the interior. Along with other accretions they were moved or removed in the two major restorations of the 1830s and 1860s.

The first of these campaigns, under Manners, a local architect,

was mainly concerned with repairing the blemishes and damage caused by the houses that had been built up against the church on both north and south, and revealed by their removal in the 1820s. A certain amount of tidying up was carried out internally, and pinnacles added to the tops of stair turrets externally. The second campaign, under Sir Gilbert Scott, was far more thoroughgoing. As well as replacing Bishop Montague's nave vault with a fan vault supported by a new set of flying buttresses, much extra carved architectural decoration was added to the rather plain exterior. The archaeological interests of the Clerk of the Works, J.T. Irvine, ensured that an examination, and where possible preservation and display of the buried and obscured remains of the Norman cathedral were carried out. It must be admitted that the restorations were most successful, both in safeguarding the structure and in enhancing its aesthetic appeal. Perhaps we may mourn the loss of the early 17th century nave roof, but Scott's vaulting is no small compensation.

But the major change has, of course, been in the surroundings of the Abbey. All the priory buildings, the cloister, chapter house, bishop's palace, were demolished or sold off and later built over. Rather than being the head of a semi-enclosed, rich and landed community, yet with a wider role as cathedral, the church is now merely a parish church, with ten feet of property beyond its walls. But, as Bishop John's church must have done and as Bishop King must have planned, the Abbey still dominates the centre of the town even in its modern setting.